STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY AND SELF-EXISTENCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE SELECT PLAYS OF LYNN NOTTAGE

***Synopsis* Submitted to**

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For the award of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in English under the faculty of Humanities

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May - 2019

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Introduction:-

African-American drama has its roots in oral stage performances as well as in dance drama that the African Americans brought with them as slaves from their mother country. The slaves entertained their white masters even on the ships transporting them with shows, which comprised songs, dances and drums. But during its first one hundred years the American professional theatre rigidly rejected African American performers. As a result, for almost a century and a half, white audience did not see any African Americans on the stage; they saw only the sentimental, melodramatic, or mocking images of Blacks created by white mimics. The Broadway audiences continued to enjoy black musical shows by such blacks as Will Marion Cook, Rosamond Johnson, James Weldon, and Bob Cole. A play entitled *The Drama of King Shotaway*, formed by African Americans, was produced for the first time in New York in the African Grove Theatre in 1821. Loften Mitchell has chronicled in his *Black Drama: The Story of the American Negro in the Theatre* the long and detailed history of African-American Theater since the closing down of the African American Grove.

The nineteenth century provided a necessary context for the emergence of African American drama. In 1901, a school principal named Joseph S. Cotter Sr. published a full-length play entitled *Caleb the Degenerate* in which he contrasted the economic philosophy of Booker T. Washington with the backwardness of African Americans. The man who opposed vehemently Washington's accommodationist philosophy was W. E. B. DuBois, whose play *The Star of Ethiopia* (1913) made the African Americans aware of the spectacular history of their achievements spanning continents. *Rachel*, which is believed to be the first straight play (i.e. non-musical), deals with the failure of a middle-class African American family to

prospect in a racist America. The early decades of the twentieth century, especially the 1920s and the early 1930s, are known as the period of the Harlem Renaissance or, as Alaine Locke termed it, the "New Negro Renaissance" when the African American creativity emerged in full abundance.

As the spirit of Harlem Renaissance began to decline with the emergence of 1940s, African American drama took a new form, the form of caricature. It took upon itself the function of caricaturing the accommodationist tendencies of the African American bourgeoisie. In the early 1950s African American drama came of age professionally with the effort by a young playwright named Louis Paterson. His *Take a Giant Step* (1953) is concerned with the problems that an African American boy faces in growing up in a white neighborhood. Like *Take a Giant Step*, William Branch's *A Medal for Willie* (1951), Alice Childress's *Trouble in Mind* (1955), Loften Mitchell's *A Land Beyond the River* (1957), and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), deal with the processes through which the African American characters try to come to grips with their predicament and to learn how to transform their adversity to some sort of triumph.

In the 1960s the playwrights of the Black Arts Movement joined the radical politics and aesthetics of mainstream culture and used the opportunity for challenging the misconceptions and conventional notions about African Americans perpetuated by the white Americans. In the process, they also tried to develop in their work positive images of African Americans through re-definition of Blackness and its intricate color symbolism. During the 1970s the nationalistic fervor created by the Black Arts playwrights, especially Baraka and Bullins continued with some modification with the younger playwrights like Ntozake Shange and others. In fact the literary upsurge created by the Black Arts Movement affected social and political changes involving the fate of African Americans. In the 1980s and the subsequent years African American theatre suffered financially, due to the lack of support

from the community as well as from the funding agencies such as National Endowment for the Arts.

The 21st century witnessed a massive change in African American drama witnessing the strong development, dealing with the realistic depiction of African Americans, their struggle for life facing utmost atrocities, discrimination and sexual abuse. Many African American dramatists are coming into the limelight such as: Ron Allen, Christina Anderson, Leslie Lee, Antoinette Nwandu, Katori Hall, Pearl Cleage, and Lynn Nottage.

The present proposed research is an attempt to find struggle for identity and self-existence of African American women in the select plays of Lynn Nottage. The select plays of Lynn Nottage are based on realistic experiences of African American's lives particularly the African American women's struggle for identity and self-existence. Nottage wanted to show that her women are facing many problems in their lives, in every walk of life they are finding themselves with double crises - the crises created by their own males and by the white world in which they are living. The women's position in every society remained secondary. Many women face sexual abuse, molest and rape. In the African American drama various female issues are discussed realistically, boldly, courageously and extensively. The select plays of Lynn Nottage for the present research study are *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* (1995), *Intimate Apparel* (2003), *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* (2004), *Ruined* (2007), *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* (2011), and *Sweat* (2015). In these select plays one can see women's struggle for their identity and self-existence. Though they are treated secondary and neglected in their own society and the American white society; they never gave up the spirit of life, they always try to find their identity and self-existence. When one believes on what he thinks about himself, certainly his life begins to switch its roots to his thought process. When people describe anything as life-spirit they mean that there is still a positive hope to celebrate the life rather than the destruction of life and Nottage's women are not

exception to this, her women being betrayed or tortured by their own men or the Whites struggle to create their identity and find self-existence.

Lynn Nottage writes plays that interrogate stereotypical representations of African American women by reconsidering their historical significance through a contemporary understanding of the nexus between race, gender, and class. Nottage's plays demythologize difference by emphasizing the complex communities to which African American women have historically belonged. Her plays relocate African American women characters from position of racial isolation into positions where they can find their place as an identified human being. Nottage's plays portray rarely-captured moments in American history that revolve around complex issues in society with the lives of working class African American women in the early twentieth century.

In this research study the researcher argue the importance of Nottage as a significant new figure in the tradition of African American women's literature. Through her commitment to redefining community, Nottage's plays position African American women as key members of expansive alliances. The researcher will discuss why this breakthrough in identity studies occurs in drama, what challenges the African American women are facing to find their identity and self-existence.

1.1. Statement of the Problem:-

The present proposed research title, "Struggle for Identity and Self-Existence in the Select Plays of Lynn Nottage" explores the crises in the lives of African American women. The white Americans and the males from their own society always ill treat the African American women. The history tells us the atrocities against the African American women, where they were treated inhumanly. In the present scenario they are facing so many challenges like: racial and gender discrimination, struggle for identity, and self-existence.

1.2. Review of Literature:-

The review of literature involves detail literary study in the field of relevant subject. The proposed research surveys African American drama, African American women playwrights, Lynn Nottage as an African American playwright and her dramatic world. In African American writing discrimination is a dominant theme and in women writing the African American Women are of the center. However the significance of their contribution to African American literature had only been accepted by critics few years back, when many African American authors got prominent positions at the international level. African American women playwrights' works revolve around the issues of African American women and their struggle for identity and self-existence. Most of them have heroines instead the heroes in their plays and they introduce American white world and male from same race as oppressors. Being oppressed, the African American women never surrender, instead they try to stand with great force to surpass the oppression and find a recognized place in the contemporary society. It can be identified form the plays such as: Zora Neale Hurston's *Color Struck* (1925), Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Adrienne Kennedy's *Funny house of a Negro* (1964), Sonia Sanchez's *The Bronx is Next* (1970), Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide* (1975), Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West* (1995), and Lynn Nottage's *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* (1995), *Intimate Apparel* (2003), *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* (2004), *Ruined* (2007), *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* (2011), and *Sweat* (2015).

1.3. Aims and Objectives of Research:-

The aims and objectives of proposed research are as follows:

1. To investigate African American women's struggle for identity and self-existence.
2. To analyze the hegemonic power structure in American society.

3. To study African American women's daily struggle at familial, socio-political, and professional level.
4. To study African American women's black consciousness.
5. To critically analyze African American women's identity and self-existence.

1.4. Rationale of the Study:-

The rationale of this research is to completely concentrate on the struggle for identity and self-existence of African American women in the select plays of Lynn Nottage. The select plays represent betrayal and jealousy against African American women and how they struggle to overcome from it. The betrayal and jealousy affect African American women's individual and social development. The rationale of the research is to find the treatment given to socially, economically, politically, and professionally neglected African American women. The present research is an attempt to comment on African American women's struggle with the society and themselves to find their true identity and self-existence.

1.5. Hypotheses:-

The present research focuses on following hypotheses:

1. Struggle for identity is one of the biggest questions in a globalised world.
2. Struggle for self-existence is a continual process in the universe.
3. Struggle for identity and self-existence is strongly focused in the select plays.
4. Betrayal and jealousy cause many losses; these affect the individual's progress.
5. African American women are always the victim of racial and gender discrimination.

1.6. Research Methodology:-

The present research is a qualitative research. It uses textual descriptive method of analysis. It critically analyzes primary sources. The primary sources include Lynn Nottage's

Crumbs from the Table of Joy (1995), *Intimate Apparel* (2003), *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* (2004), *Ruined* (2007), *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* (2011), and *Sweat* (2015). The research also focuses on complete observation of African-American women playwrights' plays.

The data for the research study is collected from primary and secondary sources. The data is critically analyzed. The primary and secondary sources are as follows.

A. Primary Sources:-

All select plays and interviews of Lynn Nottage are primary sources as follows:

1. *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* (1995)
2. *Intimate Apparel* (2003)
3. *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* (2004)
4. *Ruined* (2007)
5. *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* (2011)
6. *Sweat* (2015)
7. Lynn Nottage's interview by Dwyer Murphy (2013), Jean E. Howard (2014), Victoria Myers (2015), etc

The primary sources will be critically analyzed in Qualitative levels.

B. Secondary Sources:-

A secondary source is the source that provides non-original or secondhand information. The secondary sources include reference books on African American literature, reviews about the select plays, biographies and critical studies of author's works, related research papers and research dissertations. Secondary sources also include E-resources. The secondary sources will be analyzed in Quantitative and Qualitative levels.

1.7. Scope and Limitations:-

The scope of present proposed research study is to understand and examine struggle for identity and self-existence of African American women in the select plays of Lynn Nottage. The African American women characters in the select plays struggle for identity and self-existence in America where sexual harassment, physical violence, unequal treatment and discrimination are strong factors. The select plays guide us to understand African American women's struggle for a meaningful life. Lynn Nottage as a woman writer understands women issues rightly and fiercely criticized betrayal of women. The present proposed research concentrates on her *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* (1995), *Intimate Apparel* (2003), *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* (2004), *Ruined* (2007), *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* (2011), and *Sweat* (2015). The limitation of the present proposed research is all other plays of Lynn Nottage and other African American women Playwrights are excluded from the research. Nottage's other works and other African American women Playwrights' works discuss issues like race, gender, classism, sexism, women identity, etc. are excluded from the research. Finally, the research only explores select issues – struggle for identity and self-existence of African American women in the select plays of Lynn Nottage in critical manner.

1.8. The Significance of the Study:-

The proposed research is to focus on the struggle of African American women for identity and self-existence in American and African American society. The main significance of this research is to focus on women's struggle and how they raise their voice against suppression. African American women are victimized by their men and white society very badly in the U.S. This research is an attempt to highlight women's struggle in a broad way. The research highlights how socially, economically, professionally, and politically suppressed African American women struggle to find their place in the society where for

centuries and still the discrimination, betrayal, and negligence is dominant. For example, in Nottage's *Ruined* (2007) women characters work in brothel-cum-bar that is in the center of war field in Congo, who have chosen their job as prostitutes as it seems to have their only way to survive. The present research is comment on the factors opposing the development of African American women and how they overcome from this opposition.

1.9. Tentative Chapterization:-

The present research is divided into following five tentative chapters.

Chapter One: Introduction

The first chapter is of introduction. It includes concept and definition of identity, self-existence, and drama with a brief history of African American drama. The chapter concludes with biographical and literary sketch of Lynn Nottage.

Chapter Two: Identity and Self-existence in C*rumbs from the Table of Joy* and *Intimate Apparel*

The second chapter deals with African American women's struggle for identity and self-existence in C*rumbs from the Table of Joy* (1995) and *Intimate Apparel* (2003). *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* (1995) reveals struggle of Aunt Lyly in the North, migrated from South in search of political, personal, and professional safety. *Intimate Apparel* (2003) tells the story of Esther's existence, who is a black seamstress waiting for her marriage from eighteen long years and finally get married but betrayed by her husband.

Chapter Three: Identity and Self-existence in *Fabulation* and *Ruined*

The third chapter deals with African American women's struggle for identity and self-existence in *Fabulation, or The Re-Education of Undine* and *Ruined*. *Fabulation, or The Re-*

Education of Undine (2004) unfolds struggle of Undine, a successful American African publicist, betrayed by her husband and left penniless. *Ruined* (2007) is recipient of Pulitzer Prize for Drama (2009). It depicts the plight of a group of women in the civil war of Democratic Republic of Congo, despite multiple sufferings the women stay on the war-field for livelihood.

Chapter Four: Identity and Self-existence in *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* and *Sweat*

The fourth chapter deals with African American women's struggle for identity and self-existence in *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* (2011) and *Sweat* (2015). In *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* (2011) the title character Vera struggles to get her share in the Hollywood. *Sweat* (2015) is another recipient of Pulitzer Prize for Drama (2017). It reveals struggle of African American Cynthia in the American industrial workplace.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The fifth and final chapter deals with conclusion and scope for future research. It will sum up findings and a comparative value of the research. Finally the research will trace the obstacles in the development of African American women and how they face those obstacles to find their identity and self-existence.

Note: The chapterization of the present proposed research is tentative and subject to any later modification recommended by the supervisor.

Note: The synopsis is written in American English.

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Place: Nanded

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